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Building Communication in the Classroom Beyond Language

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Building Communication in the Classroom Beyond Language

02 October 2017

ESSAY BY

LUANE DAVIS HAGGERTY

I recently had an experience working on a production of *Pippin* that served as a cultural bridge between students and helped lay the foundation for a whole new teaching philosophy. I tend to direct with a mix of Deaf and hearing actors, so I was excited when, in September 2016, a drama club at the **National Technical Institute for the Deaf** in Rochester, NY approached me to direct their production of *Pippin*. The club itself was wonderfully diverse, and the mix of ethnicity, culture, and language in that one production resulted in significant artistic and teaching opportunities. We quickly learned that although everyone in the group had different cultural backgrounds and communication styles, they all had the common language of dance. So when the choreographer hired to do the show didn't show up, the whole cast banded together and cooperatively found a way to choreograph the entire show, blending Malaysian dance, belly dancing, and classical ballet. Our time working together taught us how to unite through a shared language of movement regardless of cultural differences.

Using physical theatre techniques gave more opportunities for all students to participate in the learning community, allowing those with limited language abilities more chances to develop their communication skills without the barrier that language often presents.

In July 2017, **IRT Theater Company** in New York City, an organization I co-founded in 1982, contacted me to join the teaching staff of what has become the Westside Experimental program. Artistic Director Kori Rushton had applied for the **Very Special Arts program** through the **John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts**, a program that is designed to provide enriching career development opportunities to Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing youth. I brought my student actors from NTID with me as teaching-artists. We were all aware that weaving the strands of different cultural backgrounds and experiences doesn't have to lead to accusations of appropriation, but instead can lead to a satisfying creation of new visions, new artwork, and new approaches to teaching.

The foundation of our work is seated in being sure all participants are equally able to get the information needed, and that each person has an opportunity to respond—not just those who are eager and extroverted. In hearing culture, it is common for people to excitedly speak over each other, finish each other's sentences, and ask questions before the answers to the first question are fully answered. In Deaf culture, your eyes can only read communication from one speaker at a time. This causes everyone to take a breath and slow down communication and take the time to clarify when needed. For English as second language speakers, this slowing down and clarity of language is not a hindrance but an enhancement. Allowing time for the students to also re-explain concepts to each other helped to cement the ideas presented in the workshops, activities, and class work.



Photo by Rich Stillwell Photography.

Too often when answering questions or working in small groups, those students who have a greater facility for signed or spoken language dominate the conversation, frequently leaving out students with weaker language and communication skills. Using physical theatre techniques gave more opportunities for all students to participate in the learning community, allowing those with limited language abilities more chances to develop their communication skills without the barrier that language often presents. Some of our techniques were as simple as allowing only the person who holding an object to speak

(who has the conch?), while other exercises were in the realm of mime and gestural communication used in improvisation.

We also used a Deaf theatre process developed through rehearsal called motion, posture, and gesture (MPG). In basic Deaf theatre practice, the student's body becomes the primary means of communication to the audience. The foundations of American Sign Language lead students to incorporate full body language, gesture, facial expression naturally in casual conversation. These tools are exactly the same tools used by theatre people of all cultures. Through more immersive physical theatre games and exercises, students develop their abilities to use imagination, experiences, ideas, and information to express themselves through motion, posture and gesture.

Using a more physical communication style and supporting that style with proper access can provide all students, in spite of communication differences, to have opportunities to participate in the learning community. Students with weak communication skills significantly grow in their ability to absorb process and express ideas.



Photo by Rich Stillwell Photography.

Our techniques didn't just affect the students. The parents and other actors observing our process program noted that we were creating an incubator for cultural bridging as well as a viable learning community. IRT Theater teachers began adopting methods like student journaling and teacher logs, and noticed results with student and teaching participants. The teachers noted that their students

gained confidence, felt engaged, and were enthusiastic about the learning process. These teachers also noted that students began to value each other and recognize each other's contributions to the creative and learning environment.

What is clear from this program with the IRT theatre artists is that using a Deaf cultural, physically based, hands-on approach lays a firm foundation for student success.

It may seem counterintuitive that stripping away formal spoken language can foster student growth in communication. However, when teachers incorporate a more physical approach in their teaching, students with varying levels of language ability and comfort level have opportunities to significantly contribute and express themselves. Providing proper access (such as interpreters and teaching assistants) is an important first step, but the students also need to have a sense of ownership of their own educational needs.

Historically, Deaf culture is known to be one of the only known cultures to have the cultural norms passed from child to child rather than handed down from older generation to newer generation, as Jack R. Gannon explores in **Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America**. In our teaching environment, we made room for that same dynamic to happen guided by the expertise of our teachers.

What is clear from this program with the IRT theatre artists is that using a Deaf cultural, physically based, hands-on approach lays a firm foundation for student success. Elements which might seem to be a disadvantage in the typical classroom such as difference in appearance, or learning or physical ability can actually be turned into teaching advantages in the right situation. Behavior or even the use of personal devices in the classroom can actually be turned to add to the tools teachers can use while teaching rather than seeming to be distractions to the teaching. More work can be done in future program to further refine and enhance these techniques and structures for teaching. However, it is clear from the closing interviews, documentation, and student assignments, that even in as limited a time as a two-week summer workshop, it is possible to provide a eureka moment in student learning. It is possible to reduce fear of academic and literary writing skills, and also enhance diversity and intersectionality in the classroom.

Topics

Cross-cultural Exchange

Deaf Theatre

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion

New York

Theatre Education, Pedagogy, & Training

Theatre for Young Audiences

United States

Comments 1

LUANE DAVIS HAGGERTY 2 years ago



I recently used these techniques to encourage Deaf college students to create a movement piece version of Edgar Allen Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart".

<http://www.rit.edu/news/pho...>

